

110TH CONGRESS
2D SESSION

H. RES. 1398

Expressing the grave concern of Congress regarding the continued gross violations of political, civil, and human rights of the Syrian people by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, calling on the Government of Syria to immediately and unconditionally release prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners, and for other purposes.

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JULY 31, 2008

Mr. ACKERMAN submitted the following resolution; which was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs

RESOLUTION

Expressing the grave concern of Congress regarding the continued gross violations of political, civil, and human rights of the Syrian people by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, calling on the Government of Syria to immediately and unconditionally release prisoners of conscience and other political prisoners, and for other purposes.

Whereas the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic systematically violates the most basic political, civil, and human rights of its citizens and persons within its jurisdiction;

Whereas the Department of State's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007 states that the Syrian

“government’s respect for human rights worsened, and it continued to commit serious abuses. There were significant limitations on citizens’ right to change their government. In a climate of impunity, there were instances of arbitrary or unlawful deprivation of life, and members of the security forces tortured and physically abused prisoners and detainees. Security forces arbitrarily arrested and detained individuals, while lengthy pretrial and incommunicado detention remained serious problems”;

Whereas the Department of State’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007 further states that, “Beginning in 2005 and continuing throughout the year, the government increasingly violated citizens’ privacy rights and increased already significant restrictions on freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and association, amidst an atmosphere of government corruption and lack of transparency. Security services disrupted meetings of human rights organizations and detained an increasing number of activists, organizers, and other regime critics”;

Whereas the Department of State’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2007 also states with regard to Syria that “throughout the year, the government sentenced to prison several high-profile members of the human rights community. Violence and societal discrimination against women continued. The government discriminated against minorities, particularly the Kurds, and severely restricted workers’ rights”;

Whereas in 2007, the Government of Syria held in custody between 1,500 and 3,000 political prisoners and refused to release information regarding numbers or names of people in detention on political or security-related charges;

Whereas on April 28, 2007, Syrian political prisoners Anwar al-Bunni, Aref Dalila, Mahmoud Issa, Michael Kilo, Kamal al-Labwani, and Faik al-Mir coauthored a letter from Damascus Central Prison calling on the international community to exert “continued effort and perseverance to compel the Syrian authorities to respect human rights and the international laws and treaties which it has ratified” and to release all political prisoners;

Whereas on May 13, 2007, prominent political reformers Michel Kilo and Mahmoud Issa were charged with “weakening the national morale” and each was sentenced to 3 years imprisonment for signing a petition calling for Syria to recognize Lebanon’s sovereignty and for the extension of human rights within Syria;

Whereas on May 10, 2007, human rights activist Kamal al-Labwani was sentenced to 12 years imprisonment on politically motivated charges of damaging Syrian security for a trip he took abroad in 2005, sponsored by the Department of State’s International Visitor Program, during which he met with European and American officials, including staff of the House of Representatives;

Whereas on April 24, 2007, the Damascus Criminal Court charged Anwar al-Bunni, widely regarded as Syria’s leading human rights lawyer, with “spreading false news that weakened the Nation” and sentenced him to 5 years imprisonment for his long-running civil rights advocacy and for signing the same petition as Michel Kilo and Mahmoud Issa;

Whereas the Syrian authorities continue to restrict access to the Internet and punish bloggers, including Karim

Arbaji, who was arrested on June 7, 2007, and Tarek Bayasi, who was tried on February 18, 2008;

Whereas on June 17, 2007, the Syrian Supreme State Security Court sentenced Husam Ali Mulhim, Omar Ali Abdullah, Ayham Saqr, Alam Fakhour, and Diab Sirieyeh to 5 years in prison, and Tarek Ghorani and Maher Ibrahim to 7 years in prison, because of their involvement with a prodemocracy student group;

Whereas economics professor Aref Dalila was arrested as part of the Government of Syria's crackdown on civil society in 2001 for his critiques of official corruption, and he continues to serve out a 10-year jail sentence in solitary confinement despite suffering from diabetes and heart disease;

Whereas Faik al-Mir was detained and charged with treason for exercising his right to freedom of expression by visiting and offering his condolences to the family of a prominent Lebanese individual who was assassinated after calling for an end to the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 2005;

Whereas the key members of Syria's largest opposition coalition, the Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change, remain in jail, having been arrested following successful internal elections on December 1, 2007, in defiance of strict security measures imposed on the members, including former Member of Parliament Riad Seif, Dr. Fidaa Al-Horani, Ahmad Tomei, Akram al-Bounni, Ali al-Abdallah, Yasser al-Eiti, Jabr al-Shoofi, Walid al-Bounni, Muhammad Hajji Darweesh, Marwan al-Ish, Fayiz Sarah, and Talal Abu Dan;

Whereas former Member of Parliament Riad Seif, the elected Secretary General of the Damascus Declaration National Council, is known to suffer from prostate cancer and has been denied access to adequate medical treatment;

Whereas Dr. Fidaa al-Horani, one of the leading female physicians in Syria and the elected Chairwoman of the Damascus Declaration National Council, is known to suffer from a heart condition and has been denied access to adequate medical treatment;

Whereas political prisoners in Syria, which include these individuals and many others, are often subject to physical abuse, torture, or inhumane holding conditions;

Whereas Government of Syria routinely arrests and detains political activists and holds them, without charge, at undisclosed locations, without any public report as to their whereabouts and health;

Whereas the Government of Syria has inadequately complied with requests for access and fact-finding inquiries from United Nations special rapporteurs seeking to monitor the conditions of prisoners and human rights defenders in Syria;

Whereas these high-profile political prisoners are indicative of a broad trend whereby independent political, civil, and human rights activists are systematically arrested or intimidated into self-censorship due to the harsh tactics of the Government of Syria;

Whereas the Government of Syria has forced scores of political, civil, and human rights activists to flee the country for fear for their lives and freedom, and continues to harass and threaten the family members and friends of activists, dissidents, and exiles;

Whereas Syrian authorities frequently prevent independent political, civil, and human rights activists from leaving the country or subject them to onerous travel restrictions so as to prevent them from carrying out their activities abroad;

Whereas the 1963 Emergency Law remains in effect, authorizing the Government of Syria to conduct preventive arrests and overriding constitutional and penal code provisions against arbitrary arrest and detention, including the need to obtain warrants;

Whereas Syrian authorities continue to hold in its jails nationals from other countries, including individuals from Lebanon and Jordan, without charging them with a crime, access to legal counsel, or even acknowledging their existence;

Whereas Syrian authorities have continued to harass regionally-based journalists who reported information critical of the state, including banning or hindering journalists from reentering the country and failing to respond to requests for accreditation;

Whereas the Government of Syria has prohibited all Kurdish-language publications, has arrested journalists who have written in favor of greater Kurdish rights, and has prohibited the publication of books and other materials in Kurdish;

Whereas on March 21, 2008, Syrian authorities opened fire on unarmed Kurdish civilians in the city of Qamishly who were celebrating the Kurdish holiday of Nowruz, killing 3 young men and wounding 8 others;

Whereas the Government of Syria continues to deny the right of citizenship to over 300,000 Kurds, which keeps them

from holding national ID cards, pursuing postsecondary education, seeking government jobs and contracts, and owning, inheriting, and bequeathing property; and

Whereas the Baathist Syrian regime has consistently denied the people of Syria their most basic political, civil, and human rights, including freedom of thought and expression, freedom of association and assembly, freedom of movement, and the protection of their persons and property under the rule of law: Now, therefore, be it

1 *Resolved*, That the House of Representatives—

2 (1) condemns and deplores—

3 (A) the consistent pattern of gross viola-
4 tions of the most basic political, civil, and
5 human rights of the Syrian people by the Gov-
6 ernment of the Syrian Arab Republic, including
7 freedom of thought and expression, freedom of
8 association and assembly, freedom of move-
9 ment, and the protection of persons and prop-
10 erty under the rule of law; and

11 (B) the arbitrary arrest and unjust convic-
12 tion and imprisonment of prisoners of con-
13 science (among whom are Anwar al-Bunni, Aref
14 Dalila, Mahmoud Issa, Michael Kilo, Kamal al-
15 Labwani, Faik al-Mir, Riad Seif, Dr. Fidaa al-
16 Horani, Ahmad Tomei, Akram al-Bounni, Ali
17 al-Abdallah, Yasser al-Eiti, Jabr al-Shoofi,
18 Walid al-Bounni, Muhammad Hajji Darweesh,

1 Marwan al-Ish, Fayiz Sarah, and Talal Abu
2 Danand), calls for the immediate and uncondi-
3 tional release of all political prisoners, and calls
4 for the dropping of all politically-motivated
5 charges;

6 (2) calls urgently for the Government of
7 Syria—

8 (A) to ensure that all torture and mistreat-
9 ment of prisoners cease immediately;

10 (B) to allow political prisoners prompt and
11 regular access to their lawyers, doctors, and
12 families;

13 (C) to allow impartial international mon-
14 itors unfettered access to these prisoners;

15 (D) to lift the state of emergency that has
16 been imposed for over 44 years;

17 (E) to cease obstructing and denying
18 human rights organizations, civil society asso-
19 ciations, and political parties the ability to orga-
20 nize and operate freely;

21 (F) to allow individuals to exercise their
22 fundamental political, civil, and human rights,
23 and to engage in the full range of peaceful po-
24 litical and civil activities; and

1 (G) to cease from harassing the family
2 members and friends of political, civil, and
3 human rights activists and dissidents, and to
4 allow for the safe return of exiled opposition
5 members;

6 (3) reminds the Government of Syria that on
7 August 23, 1976, it acceded to the International
8 Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and is obli-
9 gated to guarantee the civil and political rights of
10 persons in its territory;

11 (4) expresses its support for the people of Syria
12 in their struggle for freedom, respect for their polit-
13 ical, civil and human rights, democratic self-govern-
14 ance, and the establishment of the rule of law; and

15 (5) calls on the President and the Secretary of
16 State to—

17 (A) consider pursuing further actions at
18 the United Nations to draw attention to the
19 Government of Syria's deplorable record on
20 human rights and the plight of Syrian political
21 prisoners and prisoners of conscience including,
22 but not limited to, publicizing Syria's non-
23 compliance with United Nations special
24 rapporteurs, pursuing a resolution condemning
25 Syria before the Social, Humanitarian, and Cul-

1 tural Committee of the United Nations General
2 Assembly, or pursuing a resolution to establish
3 a country-specific United Nations special
4 rapporteur charged with monitoring the human
5 rights situation in Syria;

6 (B) make the legal status and humani-
7 tarian needs of Anwar al-Bunni, Aref Dalila,
8 Mahmoud Issa, Michael Kilo, Kamal al-
9 Labwani, Faik al-Mir, Riad Seif, Dr. Fidaa al-
10 Horani, Ahmad Tomei, Akram al-Bounni, Ali
11 al-Abdallah, Yasser al-Eiti, Jabr al-Shoofi,
12 Walid al-Bounni, Muhammad Hajji Darweesh,
13 Marwan al-Ish, Fayiz Sarah, Talal Abu
14 Danand, and other political prisoners an ongo-
15 ing item of concern in bilateral relations with
16 Syria, and call for their immediate release;

17 (C) support, encourage, and reach out to
18 dissidents, activists, and nonviolent democratic
19 opposition in Syria and assist them in their ef-
20 forts to create a democratic Syria; and

21 (D) make political, civil, and human rights,
22 particularly the freedom of thought and expres-
23 sion, the freedom of assembly and association,
24 the freedom of movement, and the protection of

- 1 persons and property under the rule of law a
- 2 priority in bilateral relations with Syria.

